



ON BEING THE CHURCH

CRAIG WONG

Deliver Us from American Exceptionalism

"The far-reaching, the boundless future will be the era of American greatness. In its magnificent domain of space and time, the nation of many nations is destined to manifest to mankind the excellence of divine principles; to establish on earth the noblest temple ever dedicated to the worship of the Most High."

John O' Sullivan,
journalist who inspired America's
manifest destiny, 1839

"I still believe that America is the last best hope on earth."

Barack Obama,
2008

"If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us."

1 John 1:8

Professional football commentator John Madden often points out that "victory is a great deodorant" for football squads that otherwise stink it up during a particular game. Sloppy defense, multiple interceptions, and poor play-calling have a way of evaporating when the team manages to eek out the win. The deodorant of victory temporarily suppresses an undesirable stench...without actually eliminating its source.

Such can be said about this institution we call "American democracy" at the culmination of the 2008 election season. Whether Republican or Democrat, the general electorate (not to mention the watching world) marveled as record numbers flocked to the polling stations without violent incident or reports of

intimidation, scandal, or Diebold shenanigans. The concession speech was honorably delivered before the strike of midnight and with a transcendent message: "America today is a world away from the cruel and frightful bigotry of [Booker T. Washington's] time. There is no better evidence of this than the election of an African American to the presidency of the United States. Let there be no reason now for any American to fail to cherish their citizenship in the greatest nation on earth."

However, this rather victorious display of our prized democracy, encouraging as it was, served to deodorize the foul smell of a particularly ugly election year. Ugly is when a political opponent is cast as a "terrorist," and ignorant citizens are allowed to believe it's true. Ugly is when the association of "terrorist" with "Arab" or "Muslim" is left publicly unchallenged in order to retain voters (including cruel and frightful bigots). Ugly is when a reputable community organization, i.e., ACORN, is made a scapegoat for the mortgage crisis...or when all community organizers are dismissed, on national television by a political candidate, as irrelevant slackers that lack "actual responsibilities." Ugly is when the political calculus elevates image over substance, let alone fundamental competence. Ugly is when one's governing record is reinterpreted to woo or, as the Bible would say, deceive a gullible and itchy-eared voting bloc.

That the democracy we love to tout so easily resorts to lies, deception, scapegoating, and lowbrow pandering—while burning over a billion dollars on high-powered marketing strategies—should be sobering. Like the repulsive, slimy creatures I'd find under the rocks in my backyard as a child, the 2008 presidential race once again exposes our moral ugliness, our profound need for deliverance. We as an electorate are stripped of any presumption of innocence or being excep-

tional in any way—other than, perhaps, being exceptionally deluded.

Of greatest concern for the rest of the world, however, is the way post-9/11 America has become exceptionally barbaric. As one Iraqi put it, "You have shown us your violence. Now show us your liberation!" Such cries are echoed by brothers and sisters in Afghanistan, who watch helplessly as women and children are killed by US-led airstrikes. Whether in Syria, Pakistan, or on the African continent, the US national security apparatus continues its "forward strategy" of unilateral and preemptive action with diminishing regard for the sovereignty of other nations. We torture in secret prisons. And for immigrants, whether they are political or economic refugees (and not only from Mexico or Latin America), the US has become a hostile land where the "tired, poor, and huddled masses" are arrested and detained in brand new, Halliburton-constructed detainment facilities.

Therefore, as the church, we must resist the obligatory, inaugural message of American exceptionalism, the enduring myth that our nation has somehow been divinely appointed as a force of good in the world. True change—that is, the transformation made possible by Christ's death and resurrection—cannot be demonstrated for a sinful and deluded people if our hope remains shackled to systems and institutions driven by greed and backed by violence. Let us be, for our new president and the watching world, a visible reminder that the last, best hope on earth is vested not in a nation-state, but in the Eucharist. ■

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